Vom Tod des lebendigen Gottes

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At times one must begin again with the simplest things. Precisely when one wants to confront what is difficult! To begin with the simplest is difficult enough as it is.

The simplest thing with respect to God is: God lives. If we must speak of the death of God, we cannot in any way abstract from the fact that God lives. But must we really speak of the death of God?

That God lives—we believe this. Only in faith in God does the simplest thing with respect to God become concrete. Yet the Christian faith in the living God is originally and inseparably bound to the event, expressed in the proclamation of the cross, of the death of Jesus Christ. Whoever wished to disregard this death would be speaking abstractly about what is most concrete: the life of God. For the death of Jesus Christ is the event in which God's life happens for us, in order to reveal itself, in an Easter manner, as God's life for us. And only where God's life is spoken of as life for us is it spoken of in its reality—over against which any recourse to an 'in-and-for-itself being of God' represents a regression, abandoning faith, to an abstract possibility that only appears to be theological. The simplest thing with respect to God, concretely, is this: God lives for us.

Even talk of the death of God—if it is to be theologically responsible—must not abstract from the living God. To speak of the death of a dead God would be to speak of nothing at all. It would mean not speaking of God at all. But to speak of the death of God in such a way that one does not speak of God at all is to speak of nothing. To speak of nothing may perhaps be appropriate to death; it is not appropriate to the death of God. To speak of nothing may perhaps be interesting. Theologically, however, it remains empty. Therefore, right at the beginning, the simplest thing—still difficult enough to consider—should be stated: God lives. And thus, to speak of the death of God means: to speak of the death of the living God. It is time to remember this. Not in order to assert theology as pseudo-theology. God lives and knows how to help himself. Rather, in order to assert theology as theology. That is our task—so help us God.

I. The Return of Talk of the Death of God to Theology

To speak of the "death of God"—today this is an approach to speaking of God that is returning to theology. Our attention is therefore first directed to this return of talk of the death of God to theology. "Return" means that this way of speaking—or at least what the talk of the death of God gives us to think—was not originally foreign to theology. At the same time, "return" also means that the "death of God" has been spoken of outside theology and thought in a non-theological way. What does this return look like?

Today, when one speaks in theology of the death of God, one is usually aware that one is introducing into theology a non-theological way of speaking. At times, talk of the death of God even belongs to the deliberate attempt to lead theology out into the sphere of a non-theological mode of speech. Both the one and the other will always occur wherever

theology truly takes place, and therefore cannot be denied.

But what is ultimately decisive in such processes is whether they occur critically—whether theology knows what it is doing, and whether it does what it knows—and not merely an *aggiornamento* that conforms to the spirit of the age.

In a by no means foolish book, which wishes to be a "theology after the 'death of God,'" one can read that the "death of God" is "that all-determining event which has taken place within the last two hundred years of European history. It is a historical event…"

Anyone who still expects words to become unambiguous if they are not to be ambiguous (though even ambiguity might be meaningful) will have to ask what the word "God" is supposed to mean here. Is it being used univocally with the "God" contained in the word "theology"? Or does the concept of God shimmer? Is it being used with deliberate ambiguity?"

If the undertaking of a 'theology after the death of God' is to be Christian theology, then the claim that talk of the 'death of God' designates a 'historical event' must refer to that on account of which Christian theology reflects on faith. In that case, however, within the last two hundred years of European history, the death of this very God—the God with whom Christian theology is concerned—would have occurred as the 'all-determining event.'

This is undoubtedly true of Friedrich Nietzsche's talk of the death of God. With his talk of the death of God as the 'greatest recent event,' Nietzsche meant that 'the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable'; and it shows how much the pastor's son Nietzsche understood about the essence of Christian faith that, for him, with the loss of faith in God, God himself is gone. Nietzsche proclaimed this event as the greatest of modern times (and welcomed it as the end of the former triumph of the 'God on the cross'). For him, moreover, 'God's death' is a human deed: 'We have killed him—you and I!' Nietzsche, consistently enough, rejected faith.

From a 'theology after the death of God,' however, one will perhaps expect many things, but not this: that it should reject faith. Therefore, for it, God cannot simply be gone; rather, only a certain way of speaking about God, of thinking about God, and a certain way of experiencing what is divine—and indeed also a corresponding way of living—can have come to an end.

In that case, however, the word 'God' in the expression 'death of God' is being used equivocally. That is, the discourse is theologically irrelevant. A familiar word has been theologically misused, because theology has chased after what is commonplace instead of being critical. For this use of the expression 'death of God' says nothing at all with respect to God; it says something only about our conceptions of God. The bringing back of the discourse on the 'death of God' into theology has not exposed this discourse to the reality of God, which comes to speech in the Word of God; rather, it has unreflectively substituted the theologically ungrounded word 'God' for God himself. With this supposition, one has done exactly the same thing against which one protested in undertaking a 'theology after the death of God.'

But the equivocation of the word 'God' produced by this false supposition leads to the most theologically dangerous way of speaking about God. '*Aequivocatio mater errorum*,' says Martin Luther (and not only a logician). Equivocations render discourse insignificant. Insignificant talk about God, however, is the most erroneous and the most dangerous kind of

talk about God. If a 'theology after the death of God' does not wish to become insignificant—and in this sense dangerous—it must first renounce the *mater errorum*, the equivocally used concept of God.

After all, such a theology might at least have suspected that the much-invoked phrase 'God is dead,' so influential in the mouths of poets and thinkers over the 'last two hundred years of European history,' has an origin other than this period of history. In its current usage, this phrase obviously refers to the 'death' of the metaphysical 'God'—that is, to the overcoming, underway for two hundred years within thought, of the metaphysical concept of God. In doing so, following Friedrich Nietzsche, one proceeds from identifying the God whom Christian faith seeks to think responsibly before God and thus before the world with the metaphysical concept of God, and thereby fails to recognize that the very discourse of the death of God is itself of Christian origin—although certain texts of the previous century could have sharpened one's awareness of this.

In Jean Paul, for example, it is the dead Christ who utters the claim that there is no God. Here, then, the feeling of godlessness and a specifically Christian tone come together. The dead Christ himself proclaims from the structure of the world that there is no God.

Hegel expresses it even more clearly, namely that the discourse of the death of God—however much it may articulate the religious feeling of the modern age—has an origin older than modernity: 'God himself is dead,' as it says in a Lutheran hymn… But this 'Lutheran hymn' is a Good Friday hymn. Hegel positively—just as later Feuerbach and Nietzsche did negatively—identified the Christian God with the metaphysical concept of God. In precisely this respect, Hegel was a positive metaphysician, just as Feuerbach and Nietzsche remained negative metaphysicians through this same identification. Wherever something Christian was to be thought, metaphysics thought it metaphysically. Yet Hegel at the same time also thought the metaphysical in a Christian way. And thus he in fact brought metaphysics to its summit, as Feuerbach later rightly reproached him.

Hegel's discourse on the death of God is undoubtedly a metaphysical discourse. But in Hegel, this metaphysical discourse on the death of God remained conscious of its Christian origin: 'God is dead, God is dead—this is the most dreadful thought, that all that is eternal and true is not, that negation itself is in God… But the process does not remain here; rather, the reversal now occurs: God preserves himself in this process, and this is only the death of death.' And: 'It is infinite love that God has identified himself with what is foreign to him in order to destroy it. This is the meaning of the death of Christ.' Hegel, with such reflections, most certainly practiced metaphysics. That was his vocation and his fate. But at the same time, he reminded the theology of his own and of every future age that the event of the death of Jesus Christ is not theologically irrelevant for the being of God and for the Christian concept of God. Hegel reminds us that the word of the cross speaks of God himself, that the event of the death of Jesus Christ concerns the being of God absolutely, and therefore affects the being of God. Hegel's discourse on the death of God—which can be traced back through the Tübingen tradition to statements of Martin Luther—is thus a remembrance, not an invention! It recalls (a) the true origin of the proposition 'God is dead,' and (b) a theological task that still remains to be accomplished.

It is astonishing—and, if one dispenses with polite circumlocution, simply irritating—that one hears from theologians today that the 'death of God' is a 'historical event'

that has taken place ‘within the last two hundred years of European history.’ What has taken place there is the as yet unfinished attempt to overcome the metaphysical concept of God. In doing so, one made use of a Romantic tradition that knew how to think, play with, and live from the phrase ‘death of God.’ But the phrase itself reveals an origin other than the atheism of modernity—an origin which in fact first made modern atheism possible. For

“In every word
its origin resounds,
from which it derives.” (Goethe)

II. The Christological Origin of Theological Talk of the Death of God

In a second part, following Hegel’s hint, we will pursue the true origin of the phrase “death of God” by asking about the theological possibility and necessity of speaking of the death of God. This will be done in a brief theological reflection on some thoughts of Martin Luther. To do so, we must first briefly recall the christological dogma of the early Church as it came down to Luther, together with its scholastic interpretation, in order to understand Luther’s reinterpretation of this dogma properly.

The christological dogma asserts the unity of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus Christ. In doing so, the divine nature was distinguished from the human nature, which is taken up into the unity of the person, in such a way that the relation of the divine nature to the person of Jesus Christ was distinguished from the relation of the human nature to the person of Jesus Christ. The divine nature is originally identical with the person of Jesus Christ, insofar as the person of Jesus Christ is identical with the second trinitarian person of the eternal Son of God. The human nature of Jesus Christ, by contrast, is not originally identical with the person of Jesus Christ, but attains concrete existence in the person of Jesus Christ only by virtue of the *assumptio humanae naturae*—that is, the assumption of human nature—accomplished in the incarnation.

The intellectual achievement of this dogma, briefly outlined here, should be appreciated before it is subjected to hasty criticism. With this dogma, faith once gave a rational account of God. What took place *intra muros ecclesiae* took place *coram mundo*—and indeed in the language of the world. This is shown precisely by the logical problems that theology not only recognized in this dogma but also worked through in a way that did justice to logic itself. This occurred especially in medieval theology.
In scholastic theology, the asserted unity of person between the two natures gave rise to problems of linguistic logic. One of these was whether, on the basis of this unity, predicates belonging to the divine nature could also be said of the human nature, and vice versa. This problem was treated in the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*. The solution was formulated—roughly speaking—as follows: because of their differing relation to the person of Jesus Christ, the two natures can only indirectly designate one another. A predication that would bring about an ontological communication between the two natures is excluded. For the human nature, through its assumption into the person of the eternal Son of God, does not itself become a person; rather, it is “upheld” (*sustentare*) by the person and thus brought to manifestation, brought to concrete existence.

A substantial (*essential*) communicatio idiomatum between the two natures cannot occur, because the being of the person must not be affected by the *unitio naturarum* accomplished by it or the *unio naturarum* taking place within it. For the difference between the human nature and the divine nature—identical with the person—is greater, for example, than that between a human being and a donkey.

The specifically logical aspects and problems of the scholastic doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* need not concern us here; Reinhard Schwarz has presented them masterfully in a detailed study. What concerns us now is that Huldrych Zwingli, in the Eucharistic controversy, opposed Luther from precisely this scholastic position and explicitly deployed the scholastic doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* under the name *alloeosis* against him: 'for communicatio idiomatum, that is, the sharing of properties, we call *alloeosis*.'

This dispute is important for us insofar as, against Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Luther maintains that the unity of the two natures in the person of Jesus Christ attributes to the divine nature the predicates belonging to the human nature—suffering, being crucified, and dying—because it is the person itself that performs or undergoes the events which occur through or in each of the two natures.

Whereas for Zwingli, the *alloeosis sive communicatio idiomatum* has the function of explaining those New Testament statements which seem to ascribe predicates of one nature to the other as tropological and thus improper ways of speaking, for Luther it is precisely these New Testament statements that lead into the truth of the person of Jesus Christ.

"For that is what he calls *alloeosis*: when something is said of Christ's divinity that properly belongs to his humanity, or vice versa… Beware, beware, I say, of *alloeosis*—it is the devil's mask! For in the end it fashions such a Christ that I would not want to be a Christian—namely, that Christ would henceforth be no more and do no more by his suffering and life than any other ordinary saint. For if I believe that only the human nature has suffered for me, then Christ is for me a poor savior—indeed, he himself would need a savior… If now old witch Mistress Reason, the grandmother of *alloeosis*, were to say: 'Yes, the divinity cannot suffer or die,' you must answer: 'That is true. But because divinity and humanity are one person in Christ, Scripture, on account of this personal unity, attributes to the divinity everything that happens to the humanity, and vice versa—and this is also true in reality. For you must say: the person (pointing to Christ) suffers, dies. Now the person is truly God; therefore it is correct to say: the Son of God suffers… and this is also the truth. For in truth the Son of God was crucified for us—that is, the person who is God; for it is he, I say, the person, who was crucified according to the humanity.'"

These statements make it sufficiently clear that Luther, because he already understood the *unitio naturarum* differently from Zwingli, had to develop an almost opposite doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*. For Zwingli, the *unitio* is nothing more than the condition of the possibility of the coexistence of two natures in one *suppositum*; this dogmatically asserted coexistence provides him with the hermeneutical possibility of explaining how such improper ways of speaking in Scripture could arise—namely, ways of speaking in which suffering is not restricted to the human nature as it properly should be.

For Luther, by contrast, the *unitio naturarum* is already an event in the being of the person that goes beyond the mere coexistence of two natures, and the *unio naturarum* is the

concretely occurring history in which neither divinity nor humanity can be abstracted from the person—and therefore the divinity can no longer be abstracted from the humanity (nor vice versa): "No, my friend: wherever you place God for me, you must also place humanity with him. They cannot be separated or divided from one another. They have become one person, and he does not set the humanity aside from himself as Master Hans takes off his coat and lays it aside when he goes to sleep." From this position of Luther's, Zwingli's use of *alloeosis* had to appear as an attempt to undo the history of Christ.

This dispute between Luther and Zwingli is of extraordinary importance beyond the narrower problems of the Eucharistic controversy, insofar as it determines from where the concept of God is to be theologically constituted. Just as, for Zwingli, the assumption of human nature into personal unity with the divine nature has no significance that affects the being either of the person or of the divine nature, so too the divinity of God remains untouched by any becoming and, accordingly, by any suffering.

For Luther, on the other hand, the *unitio naturarum* means that, with the person of Jesus Christ, the divinity of God itself is moved in its being by this act—that the history which the person of Jesus Christ enacts *secundum humanitatem* becomes God's own history, a history that concerns God's very being. Indeed, this history does not merely concern God; as the history that concerns him, it also proceeds from him. And this means that God's being is, from the outset, ontologically directed toward this history.

Later, Luther presents his doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* even more pointedly and knows himself to stand apart from the tradition (Zwingli and scholasticism): "This is the same as what we say: *communicatio idiomatum*." "This is the same"—that is, the assertion that the word "man" designates the Son of God or the divine person. Accordingly, it can now be said: "It is truly said: this man created the world, and this God has suffered, died, been buried, etc." Thus the discourse of the death of God becomes possible.

For Luther, however, the discourse of the death of God is not merely possible as a logical consequence of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Rather, it becomes necessary, because in it the reality of Jesus Christ comes to its truth. One may not only say that God has died; one must say that God has suffered and died. On this necessity depends, for Luther, the soteriological implication of Christology: "For if I believe that only the human nature has suffered for me, then Christ is a poor savior."

This necessity of speaking of the death of God must not, however, be misunderstood as a soteriological postulate; rather, theology has the soteriological implication of the *pro nobis* only because God, in the person of Jesus Christ, has suffered and died. The discourse of the death of God presupposes the event of the death of God. The true origin of the discourse of the death of God is the historical event of the historical death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Let this suffice, for the time being, as a historical reflection. Its function was to demonstrate that the discourse of the death of God is theologically legitimate. On the one hand, the christological necessity of this discourse has been made evident. On the other hand, it has become possible to make the phrase "God is dead" the object of theological reflection without using the concept of God contained in this phrase and in the concept of theology equivocally. The discourse of the death of God need not therefore be meaningless. What it has to say is now to be considered.

We first ask about the meaning of death for God. Then we ask about the meaning of

the death of God for death. In both questions, the question of the meaning of the death of God for the human being is already at issue. Since we are entering an as yet uncharted field with these questions, the following reflections can be no more than an attempt at indication. The shortcomings of such an attempt are obvious—but, in my view, they are more tolerable than the flawless decision to attempt nothing at all.

III. The Meaning of the Death of God for God

1. The Meaning of the Death of God for the Being of God

The meaning of the death of God for God is to be discussed both with respect to the being of God and with respect to the human possibility of understanding God as God. I shall first discuss the meaning of the death of God with respect to the being of God.

The theological tradition has conceived the being of God as an absolutely simple essence:

simplex esse
simplex posse
simplex velle
simplex nosse

"All things are simple," as it says in the hymn of Boethius on the Trinity.

In his *omnino simplex esse*, God was understood (especially in Reformed orthodoxy) as the purest or also the simplest act: "The proposition: God is *actus purissimus* or *simplicissimus*, or God is essentially pure activity, is … stereotypical in Reformed dogmatics." God's essence was determined as *spiritus infinitus*. The act understood as spiritual life, *actus purissimus seu simplicissimus*, was further understood as a most simple act of knowing, in which God knows himself and, in knowing himself, thus knows everything: "The intellect of God is the simplest act." Accordingly, nothing new can exist for God: "For if we admit anything new in God, he cannot be eternal (and thus not *actus purissimus* or *simplicissimus*). Therefore no new object comes into God's knowledge; for then there would arise in God a new knowledge." (Johannes Cocceius)

It belongs entirely to this old tradition of Christian doctrine of God when Friedrich Schleiermacher defines God as pure activity, from which all suffering—which would make God the object of worldly activity—is to be excluded.

This tradition is contradicted by the theological necessity of speaking of the death of God. For of a God who is to be conceived only as *actus purissimus* or *actus simplicissimus*, suffering, dying, and in this sense negation cannot be predicated. Theologians of the early Church in particular did indeed sense the aporia that arises here, as Werner Elert's fine book on Theodor of Pharan shows. In connection with the doctrine of the Trinity, the theopaschite formula therefore spoke of the suffering of one of the three divine hypostases as a historical event: "One of the Holy Trinity has suffered in the flesh."

Today we are faced with the task, in engagement with the traditional doctrine of God, of understanding God's being from that event which compels us to keep every metaphysical concept of God at a distance from the understanding of God until the traditional metaphysical concepts have been rethought. This event is the death of Jesus.

Some basic features of the New Testament point systematic reflection in this direction. When

Paul the Apostle wants to know and proclaim the risen one, who belongs on the side of God, only as the crucified one, and when for him precisely the gospel is the word of the cross, then this means—beyond the undoubtedly primary soteriological intention—that in the crucified one we are to come to know God himself, and indeed not only as the one who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, not only as the one who calls into being what is not, but as the one who—by doing so—defines himself in relation to a dead person as God and thus at the same time defines the dead one as God (Rom 1:4).

When in the Gospel of John the death of Jesus on the cross is the event in which the Father glorifies the Son so that the Son may glorify him (John 17:1), then this means (even if in John the death of Jesus Christ is from the outset seen under the sign of the "deadly disgrace" of John 11) that in the hour of death the Father gives to the Son, and the Son to the Father, what is his: glory. That is to say: in this event God wills to be God.

When in Mark it is said of Jesus, who in the God-abandonment of dying cries out to his God and thus dies, "Truly, this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:34–39), then this means that in the event of this death the divinity of the Son of God was event.

Finally, in the Epistle to the Hebrews (2:9), the death of Jesus is sharply designated as the purpose of his exaltation.

Systematic theology would have to draw from this the consequence that the death of Jesus can no longer be understood as a saving event alongside others, nor as an event to be interpreted under the presupposition of a concept of God; rather, God's being as God must be understood from the event of this death, just as we are to understand the presence of Jesus Christ not from an isolated event of resurrection, but this and with it his presence as an act of his being from the event of his death: "Jesus lives because he died 'for us.'"

For if God has defined himself in the death of Jesus, then death has ontological relevance for the being of God and thus also for the life of Jesus Christ. God does not define himself with propositions, but with his own being. And he does so by defining the dead Jesus as the living Son of God: "appointed Son of God in power … by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4).

How, then, is the being of God to be thought?

According to biblical testimony, death is primarily that which is alien to God. Not merely that which is other in relation to God, like creation. Death is therefore not an event within the good order of creation as the end of a life. Death as such is not a benefit, but the alien, because it alienates from God. As such, it is the strict consequence of sin, the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). "The dead do not praise the Lord" (Ps 6:6; 88:12; 30:10; Isa 38:18f.). "He remembers them no more; they are cut off from his hand" (Ps 88:6). Job, in his final despair, even turns the alienness of death against his creator: "Now I shall lie in the dust; you will seek me, but I shall be gone" (Job 7:21). Death extends its alienness beyond its immediate place into the sphere of life, to estrange life from God—and thus life from life—through weakness, sickness, captivity, distress, and so on. In its alienness to God it is aggressive. Its essential act is negation. It estranges by annihilating what is. Death is the hopeless case.

If now the one whom we call "God" wills, in the event of this death alien to him, to be God in such a way that he does not simply pass through this death as through a triumphal gate (for the thought is near at hand that gates through which God passes thereby become arches of victory), but rather wills to be God in the event of the death of Jesus in such a way that he himself suffers this death, then this means: God has exposed himself to the essential act of death that is alien to him.

In the event of the death of Jesus, the essence of God and the essence of death encounter one another in such a way that the essence of the one calls the essence of the other into question. This is

what the Lutheran hymn means: "O great distress, God himself lies dead!"

But in that God has suffered death, death has not thereby prevailed. Rather, precisely in suffering death, God has prevailed. How is this to be understood?

If at all, then in this way: that in suffering death, in enduring negation, God has deprived death of its essential act. In this sense it is true that he has taken away death's power. The power of death has been taken from it in the powerlessness of the Son of God. The negation which death had to carry out against God exceeded its capacities. This, however, means: the essence of death, with its essential act, is in God's power. What death can still realize from itself is no longer essence, but only non-essence.

For the being of God this means: the essential act of death belongs to God himself as something essential—though not as something alien that estranges from God. "Nothing against God except God himself." Rather in such a way that God himself allows a negation in himself that creates space in his being for other being—for others, namely for us, for whose sake he entered into death.

God's No to himself is his Yes to us. The essential act withdrawn from death subsists in the being of the living God as the granting of an eternal place for those who, existing "in Christ," are chosen and destined to be in God's eternal being. God's being can therefore no longer be thought as *omnino simplex esse*. God's eternal being is more differentiated and also more temporal than we are able to think.

2. The Meaning of the Death of God for the Human Possibility of Understanding God as God

The death of God understood christologically also has consequences for the meaning of the word "God" in our speech. For if God defines himself as God in relation to a dead person, then the word "God" is withdrawn from every creative imposition of meaning by human beings. If already in the Old Testament, as Gottfried Quell emphasized, "the word 'God' has its place only where every arbitrary creative activity of the human being is excluded," then through God's self-definition in the event of the death of Jesus the word "God" becomes meaningless in terms of human meaning-construction. Faith no longer knows any self-devised 'God.'

And in retrospect upon their "pagan" past, those who have come to faith confess that in that past—though it was, according to an ancient saying, "full of gods"—they were "without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). Now, "in Christ," their by no means godless past proves to have been a time in which they were in fact godless. For the gods are now, according to a word of Paul, once and for all demythologized and disenchanted as "those which by nature are not gods" (Gal 4:8).

This evangelical attack upon a world full of gods was indeed perceived by that world, which endowed the word "God" with meaning, and was in turn answered with the accusation of atheism against the Christian faith. This was appropriate. Just as Ludwig Feuerbach's accusation against Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was appropriate—that Hegel had made atheism an objective determination of God. In this accusation the old pagan polemic against Christianity is reflected. There is something to the fact that Christian faith once provoked the accusation of atheism.

Whoever, in the power of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, allows the word of the cross truly to speak itself out will not be so naive as to think that resurrection means the reversal of death. Rather, it means that God's life is capable of death and now, for our sake, allows death to befall it—with all the consequences this has for God in view of death, which as a phenomenon of the world still speaks independently. The message of the resurrection does not undo the word of the cross but brings it to validity. If we assume that the word of the cross is gospel—that is, a word that gives us certainty of God—then it must indeed be said that God has made atheism an objective determination of his revelation. And insofar, "atheism belongs in the doctrine of God," but not only as an experience

of the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*), but precisely as an experience of the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*).

Do theology and the philosophy that thinks the death of the metaphysical God meet here? It might seem so. Yet precisely an analysis of the most impressive of such attempts—namely the thought of Martin Heidegger—shows that philosophy cannot think the thought of the death of the metaphysical God. The final thought of metaphysics is not the thought of the death of the metaphysical God, but the metaphysical thought of the death of God. The confused consequences of this in theology we have already considered at the beginning.

IV. The Meaning of the Death of God for Death

Here too I restrict myself to indications. The event of the death of Jesus Christ was of significance for God insofar as God identified himself with the dead Jesus in such a way that the dead Jesus could, indeed had to, be proclaimed and confessed as the Son of God (1 Cor 9:16); the gospel of God, which must be proclaimed, is the gospel of his Son (Rom 1:1 and 1:9), and the Son of God is, according to the flesh, the one who came from the seed of David (Rom 1:3). We said: God defines himself in relation to a dead person by defining the dead one as the Son of God. And since God defines himself with his own being, death becomes a predicate that determines the being of God. The discourse of the death of God has ontological relevance for the being of God. God suffers death in order, precisely in this act of suffering, to prove himself as God. But if God proves himself as God in death, then God does not prove himself as God without death. Christologically this means: the crucified one cannot be proclaimed as the Son of God apart from the cross. The death of the risen one must be proclaimed until the Lord comes (1 Cor 11:26). Resurrection therefore cannot in any case mean that the Son of God who suffered death has left death behind him and returned to life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ does not mean: the return of the same. What, then, does it mean?

From our context it means nothing other than this: that the death of God, in determining the being of God, changes death. In the event of the death of God, God allows death to determine the being of God and has thereby already determined death. In the event of the death of God, death is determined to become a phenomenon of God.

The idea of the death of a god is familiar to myth. The deity dies and returns. The deity returning from death leaves death behind in order to return to life. But whoever leaves death behind in order to return to life still has death before him. Death remains the same as it was.

Paul, by contrast, joins with the believers in the knowledge: “knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9). Rather, “death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). And just as death is swallowed up in victory, so the mortal is to be swallowed up by life.

This, then, is what has happened in the event of the death of God: that death had to surrender its negation (as its victory!) to the one who endured this negation in himself. Death, deprived of its victory, is death deprived of its own power. God, who takes death upon himself, has taken death upon himself once and for all. Thus he has taken away death’s power. God, once in death, does not get rid of death again, because death is not to get rid of him, God. Wherever death now goes, God himself goes. Thus God kills death—not by leaving it behind and abandoning it, but by taking it with him into the life that God himself is. Therefore the risen one appears as the crucified one. Therefore the wounds of the Lord are the signs of his lordship.

The meaning of the death of God for death is thus only the other side of the meaning of the death of God for God. Death, deprived of its own essential act, is now experienced as a benefaction of God: as a benefaction of God for us. Because death has not been left to itself, but, endured and

suffered by God, has been taken up into the life that God himself is—because its negation is now determined, as a making-room within the being of God, to prepare a place for us (John 14:5)—therefore death is transformed into a benefaction which makes the ability to die possible again. The meaning of the death of God for death shows itself in New Testament language in that death now has multiple meanings. Under the law, it is still the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). As long as the death of the Lord must still be proclaimed (1 Cor 11:26), death—which as the death of the Lord has already become a phenomenon of God—is still at work as a phenomenon of the world. Death must still occur. But neither death nor life can separate believers from the love of God that has become event in the death of God (Rom 8:38f., cf. v. 36). Just as the life of God is God's life, so now the death of God is God's death. Thus "none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself; for if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Rom 14:7ff.). Death still occurs. But the Christian dies "in the Lord" (1 Thess 4:16; 1 Cor 15:18; Rev 14:13). And although—no, because—life is for the apostle identical with Christ, death is gain for him (Phil 1:21).

Death, which has become a phenomenon of God, still awaits the believer as a phenomenon of the world. But as such it has been demythologized with respect to dying. Dying is no longer the alien power that breaks into life as its end. It no longer estranges human beings from God; rather, it belongs from the beginning to Christian existence. Death, as a phenomenon of God, belongs constitutively to the life of Christians as dying. The apostle dies daily (1 Cor 15:31). The death of the Lord takes effect in him, but always unto life (2 Cor 4:10f.; v. 16): dying, we live (2 Cor 6:9). All this on the basis of participation in the death of Jesus Christ, which takes place in the sacrament of baptism (Rom 6).

The problems that arise here require thorough investigation. For now it can only be a matter of noting the peculiar differentiation that the phenomenon of death has undergone through the event of the death of Jesus Christ. This differentiation arises from the event of the death of God, in which not only something happened with God, but—because it happened with God—something also happened with death.

What has happened here shows itself conceptually in a difference of meaning in the word "death," which we have at least indicated. This difference in meaning is so great that one might now speak of an equivocation—not of the concept of "God," but of the concept of "death"—if it were not that the event of death itself, namely the event of the death of God, constituted this difference in meaning. In this event, death—which closes off the world and its unity of meaning—has been brought into the light of God in such a way that it itself, and with it the world, gains new meaning. Martin Luther defended it as necessity and certainty (*necesse est… certum est*) that "all words in Christ receive a new meaning in the same thing signified" (thus not equivocation, but analogy!). The change of meaning asserted here arises from the change of being accomplished in the event of the death of Jesus Christ. For what happened to death in this death gives death—and everything that must die—a new, good meaning. For, to quote Luther once more:

> The eternal light enters there,
> Gives the world a new radiance.
> It shines well in the midst of the night (of death)
> And makes us children of the light.

We would have begun to understand if we could greet the world in the new, good radiance of the glory of the death of God with a "Kyrieleis!"